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A VISIT
TO AN
INFANTS' SCHOOL

BY MRS. CAMERON

AUTHOR OF "EMMA AND HER NURSE," "MARGARET
WHYTE," "THE TWO LAMBS," ETC., ETC.

NEW EDITION

LONDON
HOULSTON AND WRIGHT
65, PATERNOSTER ROW.

A VISIT TO AN INFANTS-SCHOOL.

A VERY poor woman, called Kitty Brown, who lived upon a common, was sent one day upon an errand to the mistress of an Infants-School, who lived at a town a few miles off. The mistress was in the school, teaching a great many very little boys and girls, when the poor woman came; and she invited her in to look at the children. Kitty Brown had never been at an Infants-School before, and she thought, that to see so many little children so orderly, happy, and clean, was a very sweet sight; and to hear them singing the praises of God with very soft voices, was still more pleasant: and the tears came into her eyes as

she looked at them, and listened to their hymns.

Before the schoolmistress sent Kitty away, she asked her several questions about her own children.

When Kitty reached the common on which she lived, all the children were gathered together in the middle of it, by the side of a large pool where there were some geese swimming. There were many gorse bushes upon that part of the common, and some old trunks of trees which had been felled some years ago, and never carried away. Here all the children used often to collect, and they made a very great noise. The playing and running about was good for them; but the people who lived on this common were very wicked.

The children learned many bad words and behaviour too from their parents at home, and from the young men who used to play at Pitch-and-Toss near them, and the old men who were sitting or lying in the sunshine, and talking together. The sides of the

common were surrounded by a large wood; and along the other side there ran a deep miry road which led to a village five miles off, where stood the parish church belonging to the common; but there was a river between the village and the common, and it was so out of the way, that it was not often visited by any person likely to benefit the people: and the people themselves seldom, if ever, thought of going where they might learn any good.

As the poor woman passed along, she looked for her own children. The youngest of them, except the baby she carried in her arms, was three years old, and it was see-sawing on the branch of a tree; his little sister sat below him on the ground, soaking her little feet in the segs by the water side; and the eldest boy, about seven years, was almost at blows with another boy about his own age; and the noise among all the children was quite dreadful to such persons as hate to see wicked tempers and sinful jesting a-



mong little children. The poor woman stood still, and called her children loudly by name. Whether the noise was too great for her voice to be heard, or the children did not choose to hear, I do not know; but they did not move till she was gone towards home, when they all ran after her, calling out, "Mammy, mammy, I want my supper, give me my supper:" and they were all barefooted, and very dirty, though their short garments, which were very little lower than their knees, were not ragged. The poor

woman's house was roomy enough: it had a good kitchen, and a little brew-house, and two good bedrooms; and it had a good piece of ground round it; but the ground was not well cultivated, and contained nothing but potatoes: there were gaps in the hedge all round, and there was no pig in the sty. The house wanted whitewashing; and there were marks of neglect all about it.

The children reached home almost as soon as their mother; and the mother, laying down her child in the cradle, (for it was asleep,) made up a little blazing fire to get her husband's supper; and all the time she was doing this, the children cried for theirs.

When James Brown came in, he grumbled that his supper was not ready: but his wife having explained the reason, he said no more, and sat down to wait for it, watching the pot as it boiled; and neither he nor his wife spoke, but there was noise enough with the children. As soon, however, as they were all served, the

house became quiet; and when the children had been put to bed, the mother seating herself on a stool, began to tell her husband what she had seen and heard that day: and, when she had finished the account, she looked at him with tears in her eyes, and said, "Can you wonder, James, that I should be sad to see how unlike our poor babes are to these good children?"

"They are no worse than all the children about us," returned James.

"We have lived in this wild place," said Kitty, "till we have forgotten all our goodness, and we cannot see what our children are. I wish we had never come upon this common: we are not at all like the people we were when we came here first."

"That is true;" said James, after some minutes silence.

"Tom was a year old," said Kitty, "when we left our own native place; and who had a cleaner house than we had? and who went more regularly to church?"

"Well," returned James, "we did it with a good intent, thinking to better ourselves; and who could tell that we should get among such bad neighbours?"

"Now," repeated Kitty, "we scarcely ever visit a church; and our children run wild on the common; and we keep nothing decent as we ought. Truly 'evil communications corrupt good manners.'"

"But when you did try to do better," said James, "you had no peace among the neighbours."

"It might not always have been if we had persevered," returned Kitty. "But, James, are we to lose our own souls, and let our children's souls perish, and live like dogs and pigs, because we are afraid of our neighbours? May be, when we first came here, we had too much pride in our hearts, and set ourselves up too much: but we have been humbled since then; and, with God's grace, we might do better now if we were to try."

James was silent a long while. At last, he said, "Kitty, I believe we have been wrong; and you and I will have more talk on this subject."

Kitty was very thankful that her husband saw things in the same light with herself.

Kitty and her husband had a great deal more discourse on this subject; but its nature will be seen by the effect. Every body must have seen that they were not such bad people as the general inhabitants of the common: but, like many well-disposed people settling among bad ones, they had got tired of contending with their neighbours, and, in many respects, had given in to their bad ways; forgetting that, even if it had been their own fault that they had got among them, it is never too late to repent; and that God can bring good out of evil: and they mistrusted the power of God, who has said, that no temptation hath taken us but that which is common to man; and that he will



make us a way to escape, that we may be able to bear it.

About a fortnight after this, James set about making his garden-hedge good at every odd minute of his time, so that no pigs, or geese, or donkeys could make their way through; and got the little wicket repaired: and then he began to get such parts of the garden dug as were not already planted with potatoes; and in this ground he purposed planting some useful fruit-trees, herbs, and flowers, all which would make the garden more profit-

able and pleasant too. And now he could make his little boy of some use to him; and he left him every day, when he went to his own work, something to do in the garden, under his mother's eye: but as the boy had always been used to his liberty, he was obliged to threaten him with the rod, and give it him too, before he could make him industrious. The same plan was to be carried on with the little girl within doors: but she was a gentle child, and could be more easily managed than her brother. She pared the potatoes, and did many other little jobs in the house; and her mother began to teach her to sew and knit; and then she would let her go with her little brother, and play in the garden. The children of the common would be often enticing their old playfellows to come to them; and a great deal of trouble the mother had in this respect; but she put the children off with kind words, as well as she could, till the habit was in some

degree broken. Nor was she without trouble from her grown-up neighbours. Disorderly and idle people never love to see others orderly and industrious: and one neighbour would call in, and then another, to know why she shut up herself so much; and why the children were never to set their foot on the common; and why she was making her house so fine with her whitewashing, and her rubbing, and scouring; and why should she not be content to live as her neighbours did? One woman, in particular, was quite abusive to her; and told her, she supposed she thought herself a great deal better than all the rest of the people, and that she was going to turn lady; but a pretty lady she would make:—and much more to the same purpose.

Kitty quietly answered, that she did not mean to set herself up, and she did not see any cause she had to do so. As for cleaning and whitewashing her house, and keeping her chil-

dren in order, it was what she had been taught to do by her mother, and she blamed herself for not having practised it sooner; and she believed her neighbours would find the benefit of it if they would try the same plan too: any thing she knew of such things she would be glad to teach them, though she had much to learn herself. By patience and gentleness, Kitty put many to silence: but, nevertheless, she and her husband did not escape persecution of various kinds; and, especially, when it came to be known that they were bent upon serving God, as well as ruling their family; for “they that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

Kitty often encouraged her eldest boy with telling him that, if he was good, she would knit him some blue stockings, and his father would take him to the village on a Sunday. In a few weeks James had saved enough to buy himself and his little boy a few articles of clothing that they wanted;

and the blue stockings were finished, and early on Sunday morning, a large fruit puff being laid up in a handkerchief for little Tom's dinner, the father and son set off by themselves in their best clothes, Kitty and little Jemima looking after them till they were out of sight. Tom had never been at the village in his life, and was very much pleased with the scheme. After they had wound along the miry lane I have before spoken of about two miles, Tom found himself all at once by the river side; and much was he pleased by the sight: for on the opposite side, he saw before him a high woody hill, upon which, among the trees, stood a great house, or hall, and by it the parish church; and the village street, beginning at the river's brink, wound up the hill, till it came within a field's length of the church gates. Tom stood still for a few minutes, looking before him, and then down the river, and then up the river, where were several barges coming



along very fast, with their sails swelling.

"O, father," said he, "this is a much prettier place than our common: I wish Jemima was here to see!"

But I must not enter into too many particulars. The father and son crossed the river presently by a ferry-boat, and then walked straight up to the Sunday-School, where the child was left with a grave and steady-looking master; and James having sauntered a while about the door, walked up into the churchyard; and

the day being fine, he sat reading on a tombstone till service began. He stayed the whole day in the village, going to church twice, and brought the little boy safely home at night.

Tom was much pleased on the whole with the school; and, by the time the winter had come and gone, he was so much improved, that Kitty resolved upon sending Jemima with him; and the father and mother agreed together, that James should take the children in a morning, and return home to his dinner after morning service, and that he should take care of the two young ones at home, while Kitty went to evening service, and brought the children back again. The first Sunday that Kitty went to church, when she called for her children after service, she found the clergyman at the school. He was a young man, and had not long been presented to the living. As she was going away with her children in each hand, he stopped her, and asked her where she came from.

"From Pound-Green," she answered, "on the other side of the river."

"I have never seen you before," said he.

"No," answered the woman; "I am ashamed to say you never have: I fear there are few among us who have any thought for our souls."

"Indeed!" said the clergyman. "And have I never visited you?"

"No, Sir," answered the woman. "No good people ever come among us."

The clergyman looked grave, and asked a great many more questions, and then wished her good night.

James and Kitty were now become a great deal more comfortable in themselves than they used to be. Their children were improving, for they were become more orderly, industrious, and obedient, their garden was in better order, and their house cleaner: but their neighbours lived upon such bad terms with them, since they had changed their habits of living, that



they had made up their minds to leave the place as soon as they could hear of a house at all convenient for James's work. This was the state of things when Kitty took Jemima to school.

A few days after this had happened, Kitty was very much surprised one morning to see the clergyman coming up the miry lane towards the common. She was in her garden, and stood still at her gate to make him her courtesy as he passed, and Tom and Jemima were ready on each side of her to pay their respects.

The clergyman seemed pleased at seeing them, and turned immediately into her house, where he sat down, and entered into conversation with her, asking her a great many questions about the neighbours.

“I ought to have known of this place before,” said he: “but it is at the bounds of my parish, and I hardly knew I had any sheep in this common.”

“We are black sheep,” said the woman; “and I fear you will not do much good with us, though the grace of God is all-sufficient.”

“We must, at any rate, see what can be done,” he returned. “Had we been left to ourselves, what would have become of us?”

The woman made no reply; and the clergyman proceeded, “What induced you first to send your children to the Sunday-School?”

“Sir,” replied the woman, “my husband and myself came of very decent parents, who brought us well up

for our station, both in the fear of God, and all honesty; and we set out in this way ourselves, till my husband was advised to come into this country for work, and we took a house here. And soon, I am ashamed to say, finding that religion and decency only made us enemies, we fell into careless habits: though, blessed be God, we were kept from many bad ways of the neighbourhood; such as poaching and stealing, and many other such things."

Clergyman. You have learned one lesson from this: that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Had it not been so, the example of your neighbours would not have so easily led you to forget that God who created, redeemed, and blessed you all your life long. But, pray, what led you to make any change in your habits?

Kitty. My husband and myself were at times very uneasy about our way of going on, and, especially, our

neglect of the Sabbath; and I think this uneasiness increased upon us as our children became older, and we saw them growing up in all the wicked ways of the other children on the common: but still these feelings from time to time passed away, till some time ago, I was sent by the person my husband works for, on an errand to a woman who keeps an Infants-School at the next town: and when, Sir, I saw a number of little ones collected together in such order, and those who were as strangers to them taking such pains with them, to teach them the good way, and I heard their sweet innocent voices raised in praises and prayer, my heart smote me with the thought how wicked a mother I was to let my own babes perish for lack of knowledge; and this thought led to many other thoughts: and when I came home, I laid my mind open to my husband, and he soon saw things as I did; and we began to pray to God for light and direction: and I



believe it was through his guiding that we drew away our children from bad company, to keep them at work or at play under our own eye: and so we were led to do many things in our house and garden which we had before left undone, for the employment of our little ones: and then, the next step was to get the children a little religious instruction; for when we came to try to teach them any thing, we found ourselves still in much darkness and confusion: so my husband took the boy to the Sunday-School,

and went himself to the church every Sunday: and from this time, Sir, we have seen our way much more clearly. We always knew something of religion, but my husband has often said to me, that he never heard the truth so plainly set forth as he has this winter at church.

Clerg. In what respect?

Kitty. Why, Sir, in what relates to the evil of our own hearts, and the punishment we deserve: how, when we were lost and ruined by sin, God so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life; how Christ died for the ungodly; and how he ascended up into heaven to prepare mansions for his people; and how he sends down the Holy Ghost the Comforter into their hearts to guide and lead them into all truth. Sir, I listened to the account my husband gave me of these discourses till I was determined, if possible, to hear them my-

self: and so my husband and I agreed that I should go one half of the day, and he the other, till all our little ones are old enough to be taken so far every Sunday; and last Sunday I went for the first time, and took my little Jemima, Sir, as you may remember, to the school.

Clerg. I dare say you can now, from your own experience, say that there is great peace to those who love the law of their God.

Kitty. Indeed, Sir, we are happier now than ever we have been at any former period of our life; but we are still so disturbed by the contradiction of our neighbours, that we are trying to get a house somewhere else, and leave the country at any rate.

Clerg. Let me advise you to wait a little before you take any step of this sort: something may perhaps be done for this unhappy place which may make it more desirable to live in: and as you have been made the means of calling my attention to it sooner than

it otherwise might have been, you may, perhaps, be made useful to your neighbours in some other way; and surely those who have tasted any thing of the love of Christ should be ready to do every thing that is fitting to their circumstances for his glory.

The Clergyman now took his leave of Kitty, to pay his visit to some of the other houses. As he was seen to come out of Kitty's house, and go further on the common, the wild people all came out of their houses to stare; and the clergyman's first reception among them was the usual first reception of all the ministers of the Gospel: some scoffed and laughed at him, a few received him gladly, but the greater part stared and wondered, and cared nothing about him.

But it is not my purpose to enter into any particulars of this visit of the clergyman to the common; nor shall I describe the thoughts and plans which passed through his mind as he walked home alone, his prayers for the

people, and his consultations with other good persons on their account, the frequent visits he afterwards made to the common, and the steps which he took for the establishment of true religion among its inhabitants: for to do good is a slow and gradual and often tedious work, and it would require much time to relate its progress. But, before I take my leave, I shall just relate the state the common was in, when I last heard of it about three months ago, it being just four years since Kitty had taken little Jemima for the first time to the Sunday-School in the village.

Kitty is now mistress, with the help of a young woman in the common, of a weekly school, which contains many of the infants of the common, and almost all the other children who do not work. Once a week the clergyman visits this school, and, at the same time, if not oftener, calls upon the aged and infirm, who are not able to walk down to the village. Most of

the children who are old enough to walk so far, attend the Sunday-School in the village; and Kitty and her husband are not now the only grown up people who walk to the village church on a Sunday. But there is still better news. The foundation of a church has been just laid very near the spot where the trunks of trees lay on which the children used to assemble: and this church is to be for the use of the common, and another populous district near at hand, which is several miles distant from its own parish church. I heard that Kitty cried for joy, the day the first stone of this church was laid: for it was done with great ceremony, and a prayer was said and a psalm was sung on the occasion.

The manners of the people are very much improved. When the clergyman visits the common, every hat is taken off, and many receive him with smiles: and a stranger may walk quietly along it without being insulted.



The appearance of the place is also improved. The houses are in better repair, and the gardens are better cultivated. Many a rose and lily has been planted, where once grew briers, and thistles, because the people have learned to spend that time in cheerful industry which was once spent in idleness and mischief. And can we doubt but that the seed of God's word is at the same time springing up in the heart of the people? We often hear of the beauty of holiness: and one reason why that phrase is

used, is, that the same holiness which cleanses and purifies the heart of man, has a tendency also to improve his outward condition, to make him orderly, neat, and clean, to lead him to admire and rejoice in the works of God. When the Bible speaks of that blessed time, which we hope is not far distant, when all men shall know Christ from the greatest to the least, it often speaks of it under the likeness of a wilderness becoming a beautiful garden, where the rose and myrtle shall flourish instead of the thorn and thistle.

I purpose to visit the common myself when the church is opened; and then I hope to see a still more visible change in the place than I have related, still more of the beauty of holiness.

FINIS.



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